

# ‘Rock Solid XXI’: SPA celebrates Vermont’s art of stone

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Gampo Wickenheiser: “Witness” Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

A granite fireplace stands in the center of Studio Place Arts’ Main Floor Gallery, flame red glowing amid the logs — granite logs. A kneeling granite garden angel, a smile playing on its lips, exudes kindness. A tabletop of petrified wood, with growth rings from millennia ago still clear, sits atop a poplar pedestal base. In a powerful social commentary in Carrara Italy marble, a child stands next to a bullet-riddled wall.

Giuliano Cecchinelli II’s fireplace, Sophia Bettmann-Kerson’s “Garden Angel,” David Hurwitz’s “Biomorph Table” and Gampo Wickenheiser’s “Witness” are among the 40 or so artworks in the “Rock Solid” exhibition that opened at Studio Place Arts this week. This annual exhibit — this year is the twenty-first — showcases stone sculpture and assemblages by Vermont artists along with paintings and drawings also relating to stone.

Also at SPA, “Moves” by Austin Furtak-Cole in Second Floor Gallery, “Crafted Narratives” by Rob Millard-Mendez in Third Floor Gallery, and “In the Current” by Gail Skudera in the Quick Change Gallery. An Art Social will be held at SPA 5 to 6:30 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 23.

“Human ingenuity has been inspired by stone for thousands of years,” explained Sue Higby, SPA executive director. “That’s why it’s so exciting that SPA launched an annual exhibition of this art medium, which has been a catalyst to many local artists, when we opened our doors 21 years ago.”

“Rock Solid” offers an annual opportunity for community and visitors to see the creativity of Vermont stone artists — new work, themes they are exploring, a range of stone and technique



Paul Marr Hilliard: “Tu” Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo



Jeanne Cariati: “At Rest” Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

For many who work in the stone industry, their commissions often go out of state with local audiences rarely seeing them. “Rock Solid” provides artists with this annual opportunity to show their own creative work, personal projects perhaps in different directions than their commercial work.

The show is also always an opportunity to marvel at technique — how these artists start with a block of stone and remove material to shape the finished work. Their profound depth of knowledge of the limits of stone allow them to open apertures through stone yet keep the surrounding material intact, carve stone away to leave shapes like entwined branches or a pile of logs, shape an angel’s spreading wings or a cat’s alert ears.

This year as in others, the show features a range of stone including Barre granite, Champlain black marble, Danby marble, found rocks, alabaster, Carrara Italy marble, and more.

“Portal” by John Matusz of granite and welded steel stands in front of SPA. A circular opening in its thick block of granite supported by steel legs invites viewers to look through it. Changing position opens different views and perspectives of Main Street life and sights.

The spectacular fireplace by Cecchinelli is startling not only for its unexpected subject and the surprise of seeing apparent flames. Look closely at the logs. To create the casual look of their pile, Cecchinelli masterfully planned and executed points of support to allow the heavy pieces to seem to float.

Two social commentary pieces in “Rock Solid” consider gun violence. In Gampo Wickenheiser’s “Witness,” a barefoot little boy with hands in pockets stands by a bullet riddled corrugated metal wall. The child’s unnerving expression speaks to the injustice of the violence experienced by so many children.

Nick Santoro’s “BRO: Elegy to the 2nd Amendment” of brownstone and bullets is an expression of sorrow for lives cut short by misuses of that amendment, he notes in his artist’s statement.

Heather Ritchie brings together marble and fabric in “Ball and Chain.” A ball of floral fabric strips, unfurls into a soft braided chain that encircles and binds together a pair of white marble breasts.

Master carver Giuliano Cecchinelli (senior) has diverse exquisite pieces in “Rock Solid.” His tiny, 4-inch-or-so, sculpture “At Rest,” with graceful curves, eloquently expresses the gesture of a woman’s body. From a rough shard of granite, his “Reclining Nude” emerges. In this year of many bear sightings, his “Salmon Fishing Bear” with the catch in its mouth and “Family of Bear” resonate. Cecchinelli’s “Weta Weema Lion” rests in a tangle of branches, front paws dangling as he peers out.

In the Third Floor Gallery are meticulously crafted sculptural objects by Rob Millard-Mendez, a frequent contributor to SPA exhibitions and a professor of art at Southern Indiana University. Millard-Mendez draws from folk art, mythology, science, and more for these engaging and thought-provoking pieces.



Rob Millard-Mendez: "Tends to Lash Out" Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

"The primary aim in my work is to illustrate and analyze concepts that I find enthralling," he says in his artist's statement on his website. "The resulting objects deal on many levels with formal and conceptual issues. The works are meant to involve the viewer visually and intellectually."



Austin Furtak-Cole: "Seated in the Rain" Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

A solo show of paintings and scratch drawings by Furtak-Cole, SPA's 2020-2021 Studio Residency Program award winner, fills SPA's Second Floor Gallery. The exhibition features his latest work, an evolution through his one-month residency.

In Furtak-Cole's acrylic paintings, large canvases with bright colors, abstracted bodies move through space. A pair of figures, one blue, one fuschia and purple, fill one canvas, huddled, arms and feet in tight in "Seated in the Rain." Yellow legs seem to take a giant step forward in "Moves."

Through this year, Furtak-Cole shifted his focus from an earlier iconography he had been exploring with elements including bricks blocks and bodies. One piece from this approach is in the show.

"I went back to my original interest in the figure and new ways of moving through space, exploring who they are and what it is like to be creative and expressive," Furtak-Cole said.

A lively series of Furtak-Cole's tiny scratch drawings fill most of one wall: 3 inch-by-3 inch pieces done on craft material with a black matte layer over bright colored paper. Underlying color patterns are revealed as surfaces are scratched off.

Loosely shaped bodies run, dance, stretch, hug, walk, touch toes, reach, and keep moving through the tiny squares.

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